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Senate

BETTER EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS ACT

Mr. CARPER. Mr. President, I serve today in the Senate, but for the last 8 years I served as the Governor of Delaware, and for several of those years as the vice chairman and chairman of the National Governors' Association. I sometimes still think a little bit as a Governor. On behalf of the Governors of this country in all 50 States, probably, I give a special thank you to those who made possible the adoption of an amendment in this Chamber today that would provide for full funding of IDEA, to meet the longstanding obligation from the Congress for programs throughout the country that are funded in this way.

I cannot recall how many Governors' meetings I sat in where one Governor after another--Democrats and Republicans, from one end of the country to another--would say, if the Federal Government would simply meet its obligations under the Individuals With Disabilities Act, if they would only do that, we would be able to meet some of our other needs in our schools--whether the needs are small class sizes, extra learning time, or technology in our classrooms. The Federal obligation is that we would pay 40 percent of the cost of educating these children. Today we provide less than 15 percent of the cost of educating these children.

We have taken an important step in the Senate toward meeting that obligation. But it is only one step. It needs to be followed by other steps when we go to conference with

the House, to make sure that what emerges from that conference committee, and what we ultimately vote on, is a final compromise containing this provision. If we do that, then the Governors of those 50 States and the parents--parents of hundreds of thousands of children--and the teachers in our schools will stand up and applaud.

I also say that as this bill comes to us today, I am encouraged. It is not a perfect bill, but it is one that offers the prospect of additional investments from the Federal Government for our schools. It offers that money with a bit more flexibility than is the case under current law. It makes it clear that we offer that additional money targeted where the needs are the greatest, but it offers that money more flexibly and demands results.

As we look more closely at the accountability provisions in this legislation, once testing begins in earnest in the various States, in accordance with annual testing and in accordance with the standards adopted by the various States, there are consequences that come to bear for schools that do not make progress in accordance with the schedule agreed to, adopted by the individual States.

If a school is not making progress in meeting its own stated goals by the end of the fourth year--if a school continues to fail its students--a number of things will happen. One is that those students in that failing school must be offered the right to go to

another public school, where transportation will be provided by the school that is failing, by the school district that is failing, using up to 15 percent of their title I moneys.

There are also three other things that must happen to that school that fails for the fourth year in a row. One, it has to be closed and reconstituted as a charter school, or, two, closed and reconstituted with a new administration and with a new faculty, or, three, turned over to the State or some profitable enterprise, commercial enterprise, to run the school--those three options.

I simply remind my colleagues, as we move past the adoption of the funding for IDEA, we have to keep in mind the accountability provisions. We have focused on more money and more flexibility, and I support that. But on the accountability issue, if children are really going to have the ability to choose another public school, we have to make sure we include in this bill assistance to States and school districts across America to enable them to adopt public school choice statewide. It is not easy

and it is not free.

Secondly, if we are really serious about charter schools being a viable option for schools that fail 4 years in a row, we need to provide assistance, including brick-and-mortar assistance, so that those charter schools can be successful, so the kids going to those schools will have a fighting chance to get the kind of education they did not previously receive.

I say to Senators HARKIN and HAGEL, who have worked for weeks on the legislation to increase IDEA funding and to make sure we meet our fair share of that burden, job well done.

To the Senator from Vermont, the chairman of the committee, and to Senator KENNEDY, who has been very supportive, I give my thanks as well.

On behalf of all Governors who have sought this support, sought this day, this kind of victory, it is a day to salute and celebrate for their children, for their students, and all of America.